DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 973 RC 022 820

AUTHOR Kylin, Maria
TITLE Making Outdoor Places for Children: How Children's Needs for Outdoor Places Are Reflected in Community Plans. A Pilot Study.
PUB DATE 1999-10-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Communication in Urban Planning Conference (Goteborg, Sweden, October 2-5, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Development; *Childhood Attitudes; *Childhood Interests; Children; Foreign Countries; *Outdoor Activities; Parks; *Play; Playgrounds; *Urban Planning
IDENTIFIERS Nature; Sweden

ABSTRACT

Neighborhood parks and playgrounds are included in the planning of residential areas in Sweden, but the specific requirements and needs of children are seldom considered. In a pilot study in the town of Eslov, a focus group of seven teachers and planners identified outdoor places which they thought were preferred by children, and four boys and four girls around the age of 11 described their everyday outdoor places via show-and-tell walks. Findings showed that teachers and planners believed that the outdoor locations near the residential areas were the places most used by children. This was consistent with what the children described, but for them these areas had other dimensions. The children focused on "small" or "special" places such as a tree, bush, secret hiding place, or hut. The street, the school playground, and a glass-covered arcade were also mentioned. Only two children mentioned a specific playground they also liked. Teachers' descriptions of places often took a child's perspective in that they mentioned small places; planners felt that children should be protected from urban dangers such as traffic, and talked about parks, green areas, or nature; but the children described places in terms of what they did there, seldom mentioning playgrounds, schoolyards, woods, or nature. Of the five green areas that the focus group expected the children to use, the only one used on a daily basis was reserved for a future road. Implications for urban planning are discussed. (Contains 19 references, mostly in Swedish.) (TD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

Paper to conference on Communication in Urban Planning
Gothenburg 2-5 October 1999
Maria Kylin, Department of Landscape Planning
Maria.Kylin@lpal.slu.se

Making Outdoor Places for Children. How children's needs for outdoor places are reflected in community plans: a pilot study.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Maria Kylin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 451 973

RC 022820

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Paper to conference on Communication in Urban Planning
Gothenburg 2-5 October 1999
Maria Kylin, Department of Landscape Planning
Maria.Kylin@lpal.slu.se

Making Outdoor Places for Children. How children's needs for outdoor places are reflected in community plans: a pilot study.

Introduction

In urban planning today discussions are being held on how the urban environment can fulfill the different requirements and values of its inhabitants, not only in everyday life, but also at different stages. Although children comprise a large group of users of the urban outdoor environment, they are usually restricted to places such as school grounds and playgrounds, designed to protect them from the risks of urban life. Contemporary research and practical experience show that access to and the quality of the urban outdoor environment as a whole is very important for children's development and understanding of the world (Noschis 1992). There are several facets to this: research shows how a person's general understanding and concepts are influenced by the outdoor environment (Kaplan 1982, Skantze 1996); other research shows how specific knowledge, such as motor skills (eg climbing trees), can be promoted in different outdoor environments. Latterly there has been a growing interest in Sweden in studying children's learning and development in a social context. The fact that children today spend more time in institutions such as daycare and school (Nilsson1994) and more time sitting in front of the computer, has brought the question of provision of places for outdoor play and the quality of those places to the forefront of environmental planning.

Contemporary research on childhood development shows that children's perspectives can vary from those of adults and that children are competent "experts" on the subject of their own everyday environment. This makes it especially interesting to study the outdoor environment from the child's point of view, using children as the primary informants of the study.

Since the 1970s, an awareness that distance is an important factor in accessibility to outdoor environments has resulted in the inclusion of neighborhood parks and playgrounds in the planning of residential areas in Sweden. However, the specific requirements and needs of children are seldom considered in the overall planning process. Although the value of green outdoor environments for children's learning and development is now given greater credence in current community documents (Umea kommun 1998, Sandberg 1998), it is hard to see how their needs can be cemented into the plans.

This pilot study is part of a five-year research program: Green Structure and the Development of Urban Environment, at the Department of Landscape Planning, Alnarp, Sweden (Gyllin et.al). The research program is focused on three themes relating to the function and meaning of urban green structure: biological diversity; identity; and learning and development issues.

The pilot study focuses on the town of Eslov, where planners and teachers were encouraged to identify outdoor places which they thought children preferred. The character, use and significance of these places were described and analysed in relation to how the children themselves described "their" places. Data was collected through interviews with the planners

RC022820

and teachers, and "show and tell" walks with children. Studies were also made of how the outdoor places preferred by children were reflected in municipal plans and documents. The focus group interview and interviews with four groups of children were carried out during March and May 1999.

The main questions raised were:
How well do the municipal plans and documents reflect the children's perspective and the places they actually use?
Are the places that the children consider to be "theirs" protected or threatened?
Can the places important for children's learning and development be included in the planning process?

Focus group interviews

The dynamics of a focus group can help participants define problems and questions which are more difficult to achieve with other interview methods. Focus group interviews are of special value when it comes to identifying the questions that participants regard as important (Kitzinger 1995). It was of particular interest to discover any common as well as differing points of view from representatives of two different professions - teachers and municipal planners; for this reason the group consisted of the city gardener, the city planning architect, one politician, two teachers of junior children, one secondary school teacher and the municipal planner for ecology. Discussion centred on two main questions:

how teachers use the outdoor environment today
how the municipal and regional planners incorporate children's learning and development issues in municipal plans

Interviews with children

In order to observe the children's everyday outdoor places, I chose to do interviews during "show and tell" walks. 8 children were split into four, comprising two groups of two girls and two groups of two boys. All the children attended the school of Fridasro (Fridasroskolan) and we started our walks from school and walked their route home. From there we continued to walk around their neighbourhoods for approximately 45 minutes. The walks ended with a talk and looking at a map of Eslov. We also discussed places in Eslov that the children had visited in the past.

Depending on their age, background and home conditions, children have different requirements and patterns of movement. I chose to interview children around the age of 11 for several reasons: the outdoor environment has greater importance at that age rather than in earlier childhood; (Nordstr–m 1990); the children start to move in wider circles away from their home and get to know their city (Lieberg 1992); and they are also more articulate and talkative at that age.

As the children were interviewed in groups, they could support each other, and my authority as an adult seemed less inhibiting. The interviews were not structured, although there were some key questions:

How do children experience the outdoor places which adults claim are important places for learning and development?
What do children do in "their" places and how do they do it?
Which characteristics and qualities of these places do children relate to?

Results

Focus group interview

The adults who participated in the focus group were broadly classifed as teachers or planners. Every occupation develops its own language and "unconscious" knowledge that is taken for granted (Persson 1998). It was clear that teachers and planners shared some of the perceptions of children, but that there were differences in their ways of describing those perceptions. Teachers talked about the character and quality of a place by describing what the child did there. The planners more often used descriptive words such as wild, bushy, rich in variety. Descriptions of places also varied in terms of scale. Teachers' descriptions were more often very detailed, for example, a tree, a hut, a shrub, while planners talked about the park and the green area.

The teachers thought that children today generally spend less time outdoors then in the past. According to one teacher this change had taken place gradually and ten years ago children would play much more on common green areas than today. This development is due to several reasons: children's free time is more scheduled in club activities; they spend more time in front of the computer and television; and they may even no longer have the appropriate clothes for outdoor activities. It was also pointed out that several of the immigrant groups have no tradition of outdoor activities. The overriding factor, however, was the proximity to a good outdoor environment - in the case of Eslov, it is surrounded by agricultural land and lacks wooded areas.

The perception of the group was that children experience outdoor activities close to their residential areas, but that when choosing weekend and leisure time activities, their priority was not an outdoor one. One teacher observed, "The weekend excursion with the family is to a shopping centre and McDonalds". All the teachers were particularly interested in learning and development in the outdoor environment and all of them made extra efforts to extend some of their lessons beyond the classroom. However, the proximity to green areas was one of the decisive factors as to how often a class could have lessons outdoors. Schools can no longer afford buses and so the children must be able to reach the areas by bicycle or on foot. One teacher suggested that it is better to have outdoor lessons frequently and for short periods than to have them infrequently and for long periods. This continuity gives several teaching advantages, in being able to follow and document seasonal changes, and to learn to feel secure in a special outdoor place. Several activities could take place during an outdoor lesson, for example, gathering small animals and insects, using magnifying glasses, studying trees, flowers and creeks.

Both teachers and planners believed that the best outdoor place for children should be wild and varied. Important qualities and characteristics included variation in vegetation and ground level; movable materials both to examine and to build huts with; water; shrubs and trees. The places should not be "ordered" or "designed" and should not be well maintained. It

was pointed out that the shortage of woods and trees around Esl–v made the existing woodlands very important. The planners reiterated the conflict between children's needs for unmaintained areas and adults' views on how a nice park or green area should look. There was also a lack of areas with movable material: there were none in urban green areas and the children were not allowed to move existing material in the wooded areas, since these were generally nature reserves. The group considered that while playgrounds could be good places for small children, they were no substitute for nature for older children.

The planners suggested that the planning process had gradually changed over the past few years in response to a growing awareness of environmental issues. As part of general planning, several surveys and analyses of environmental topics are now carried out. These include areas of existing woodlands, wetlands, open water areas and areas sensitive to pollution; however, they do not include issues relating to children's learning and development. The planners' view was that current environmental planning also benefited children's issues. This assumed that the best places for play are the existing woodlands that are usually preserved nowadays as a consequence of environmental planning.

In Eslov as in most Swedish cities, residential areas built from the 1970s onwards comply with norms stipulating the distance to neighbourhood playgrounds and parks in residential areas (Statens Planverk 1975). Moreover, these issues are sometimes discussed in conjunction with school or daycare ground projects and in the renovation or design of new playgrounds. The planners mentioned several factors that are taken into consideration when designing a new playground: natural conditions, age of the target group (younger or older children), and the chosen theme of the playground. The planners try to follow a theme in order to create a recognisable identity for each new playground.

In the interview 23 large, clearly defined green areas were mentioned, all of which were considered to be of great importance to children.

Interviews with the children

I chose to interview children from Fridasroskolan because 5 of the 23 larger green areas mentioned by the focus group were near the school route used by several of the children and also because one of the teachers in the focus group worked in the school. The green areas are: Trollsjon, Vasterdala, Husarangen, Aselunden and Hasthagen.

In general the children showed a great willingness to co-operate and talk about their outdoor places. They took the assignment very seriously and were impressed that an adult was interested in their opinion. It was striking how well they knew their everyday outdoor environment and several times I wondered whether adults in the same area would have been able to give such detailed descriptions.

Johan and Ali are two very active boys, eager to show me EVERYTHING. At the beginning of the walk they told me about a lot of fantasies to make the interview a bit more exciting, but after a while the reality turned out to be just as exciting. They described several activities during the walk: football, "bandy", climbing trees, collecting animals, riding "pulka", riding bicycles and hide-and-seek. Others were mischief-making, involving social interaction with other people, such as blowing up waste paper baskets with firecrackers, graffiti, building fires

and scrumping fruit in the surrounding gardens. They showed me the place that was most exciting - vegetation which was originally planted as a noise barrier surrounding the residential area. In this mature vegetation there were paths, openings and fire places, which they said the older children used. They knew all the climbing trees in the area and could point out other trees which were good for cherries. The boys seldom used descriptive words when they talked about the characteristics or qualities of a place. Instead they connected the places to the activities that took place there. However, once Johan talked longingly about a "pretty"place with flowers.

Alexandra and Hanna had a totally different approach to the same housing area. They did not feel they had much to show me and very reluctantly dragged me around. Hanna had a horse outside the city where she spent her spare time. They told me about some activities such as football, walking dogs and riding bicycles. In the residential area there was only one place that they showed me and that was a grassy patch where they walked the dog, Korky. But they did not really like this grassy area because of a lot of dog mess and no flowers. Dutifully they showed me a playground that they used to visit when they were younger and a shrub where they had made a hut. The conversation was hesitant until we sat down at the end for a talk and looked at the map. Then they told me about their cycle routes and their school activities. Hanna was the only child who claimed that she was often out in wooded areas, sometimes with her horse and sometimes with the rest of the family to walk the dog.

Emily and Stefanie were enthusiastic and eager to show me everything in their everyday outdoor environment. They had several routes from school and they started out by having a vivid discussion about whether they should take me on the "dog mess" route or the "field" route. These girls mentioned a lot of activities such as handball, hide-and-seek, prisoners of the fortress, jungle George, walking dogs, cycling, roller blading, building huts, and they knew exactly where all the best slides were located.

I gradually became aware during my own walks in the area and also with the children that there were different types of huts, secret huts in trees, in hollows, near big rocks, in tree stumps and above all, huts in every shrub near the playgrounds. All of the children I interviewed showed me their early huts of their own accord and told me exhaustively what they had done there.

A place that Emily and Stefanie liked was a large local playground. "Here is a hill where we can go pulka riding, here is a football field, here is a playground, here is a big meadow where we can play softball, we can do a lot of things. And we can play "herre pÂ t"ppan" and we can play hide-and-seek and prisoners of the fortress - here is everything one could wish for". Next to the playground was a car park with a small skateboard ramp and a steeplechase course built from scrap wood and old boards. The girls told me that it was mainly the boys that built it and that they had pinched the material.

We discussed the differences between Trollsjon and Husarangen. The girls pointed out that Trollsjon was much more fun because "there is a lake and animals and there are a lot more trees, it is covered in a way, and there is also a playground there".

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The girls knew many street names, and they connected streets and places to friends who lived on those streets. On some streets there were small children who were taken for walks by the girls and on other streets there were dogs that they could take for walks.

At the start of their walk Dennis and Tobias were not eager to talk about any activities and they told me that "there is nothing to do, and we do nothing". But during the walk the two boys showed that they used a large area for different activities. Among the places they showed me was a SECRET shrub next to a bus stop. Here they would hide and throw berries at the buses and they also had a hut. They were well acquainted with the large green area in the north of their residential area of V"sterdala. This area is also called V"sterdala and at the far end there was a haunted house that the other groups of children had also talked about. However, Dennis and Tobias were the only children who claimed that they had actually visited it.

Apart from football and other organised games, they told me about several other activities connected to special places. In one shrub the wind gathered Taraxacum seeds that could be used as cotton and in the haunted house there was a horse cart and old newspapers. On what made a good place, Dennis answered, "To be able to find things - everything - screws and nuts - grasshoppers, animals and butterflies". They talked wistfully about the time when they played hide the ball. That was the time when the whole outdoor space of the residential area was used, and when everyone was in the game and played on every street.

Conclusions

The teachers and planners believed that the outdoor environment of the residential areas was the place most used by children. This was consistent with what the children actually described. Nevertheless, the children showed that these areas also had other dimensions. The children showed me the "small" places: a tree, a bush or a grassy area. Only one group, Emily and Stefanie, showed me a specific playground where they also liked to play. Johan and Ali's "special place" was the vegetation-covered screening around Fridasro. Many of them talked about the street as a place to play and stay on. The school playground and the "hothouse street" (a glass-covered arcade) were also places that several of them mentioned. They all showed me huts or secret hiding places, but all of them claimed that they only used to play there. Only once was the whole housing area talked about as a single place and that was when Tobias and Dennis talked about the day when everyone played hide the ball:

The biggest difference between adults' and children's descriptions was the way they talked about qualities and characteristics of outdoor places. While the adults used descriptive terms, the children usually referred to places in terms of what they could DO there. Two of the groups referred to residential areas as beautiful or ugly by reflecting on the colour or size of the houses. Several places were good because they associated them with a friend. It was notable that the children were more animated when they talked about their own invented games as opposed to other forms of organised play.

Regarding the teachers and planners, the teachers' descriptions of places more often than not took a child's perspective. For example, teachers mentioned "small places" such as a tree or a meadow, while the planners usually talked about the park or the green area. The planners took into account children's requirements mainly when it came to planning, for example,

playgrounds, schoolyards. They considered that children should be protected from the dangers of urban life, such as traffic; NATURE, preferably in an untouched, wild and varied form, was the best place for children to play. However, the children themselves seldom mentioned playgrounds or schoolyards and never the woods or nature. Instead, they told me about places connected with social activities or to earlier childhood.

Children have the imagination to transform a place into something that is, if not nice, at least fun. As an example, Emily and Stefanie made the "dog mess" route interesting by counting the number of dog messes on that day and comparing it with other days.

Of the five green areas that the focus group expected the children of Fridasro to use, only one, Vasterdala, was used by the children on a daily basis. Interestingly, this area is reserved for a future road in the municipal planning documents. Preliminary results show that there are several such places in Eslov.

All the children claimed that more time was spent outdoors than in front of the computer. Only one child frequently visited wooded areas.

It is difficult trying to compare descriptions of places by adults and children. Different interview methods may also have an impact. In the focus group we sat indoors with maps and plans, while the "show and tell" walk with the children encouraged direct observations. But if differences in descriptions are not only based on varying interview methods, and if further studies bear out these results, then what can planners learn from the language of children and their sense of scale? And how and where in the planning process will children's requirements for place best be heard?

References

Grahn, P. 1991, Om parkers betydelse, Stad&Land nr 93, Alnarp: SLU.
Grahn, P. Martensson, F. M fl. 1997, Ute pÂ dagis, Stad&Land nr 145, Alnarp: SLU.
Kampman, J. 1998, Barneperspektiv og barn som informanter, Arbejdsnotat no. 1, Barneradet : Roskilde universitetscenter.
Kaplan, R & Kaplan, S. 1989, "The Experience of Nature. A Psychological Perspective" Cambridge Universities Press, Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney.
Kitzinger, J. 1995, Qualatative research-Introducing focus groups, Br. medical journal, 311, p. 299-302
Gyllin et. al. 1998, Forskningsplan for programmet Gronstruktur och stadsmiljoutveckling, Institutionen for landskapsplanering, Alnarp, SLU.
Lieberg, M. 1992, Att ta staden i besittning, om ungas rum och rorelser I offentlig miljo, byggnadsfunktionslara: Lund.
Lindholm, G. 1995, Skolgarden, -vuxnas bilder -barns miljo , Stad&Land no. 129, Alnarp: SLU.
Nilsson, P. 1994,`Den allvarsamma fritiden`, Statens ungdomsrad: Stockholm.
Nordstr–m, M. 1990, Barns boendeforestallningar i ett utvecklingspsykologiskt perspektiv, Gavle: Statens institut for byggnadsforskning (Diss).
Noschis, K, 1992, "Child Development Theory and Planning for Neighbourhood Play", in Children's Environments, 9 (2), p. 3-9

Rasmusson, B. 1998, Stadsbarndom, om barns vardag i en modern forort, Lunds universitet, socialhogskolan 1998:7
Persson, B. 1997, Kunskapsoverforing till yrkesverksamma inom landskapsarkitektens arbetsfalt, Agrara 33, Alnarp:SLU,.
Sandberg, A, 1998 `Information om KF-uppdraget att utforma en gronkarta for Stockholm` Stockholms kommun, Stadsplanekontoret.
Skantze, A. 1996, "Tillhorighet och framlingskap, en fororts arkitektur i de boendes meningssammanhang", Stockholms universitet, ped. Inst. rapport no. 25.
Skantze, A. 1994, Larande genom deltagande i planering, Stockholms universitet, ped. Inst.
Statens Planverk, 1975 `Bostadens grannskap. Rad och anvisningar for planering av bostadsbebyggelse` Stockholm, Statens planverk.
Umea kommun 1998 `Umea Gronstruktur: forslag juni 1998`Tekniska kontoret, parksektionen.